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Reexamining the ethnic hierarchy of locational attainment: Evidence from Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

Because of a lack of data, the locational attainment literature has not incorporated documentation status into models examining group differences in neighborhood quality. I fill this void by using the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey, which permits the identification of undocumented respondents, allowing a reexamination of the ethnic structure of locational attainment in this important immigrant-receiving city. Results first suggest that while undocumented Latinos live in the poorest quality communities, blacks live in neighborhoods that are similar to native-born Latinos and better than foreign-born Asians and Latinos. Second, the effects of education are strongest for blacks, allowing the highly educated an opportunity to reside in communities that are of better quality than educated Latinos and Asians. Thus, undocumented Latinos replace blacks at the bottom of the locational attainment hierarchy, allowing educated blacks in Los Angeles to reside in better neighborhoods than blacks in the nation at large.

1. Introduction

Over the last 15 years, scholars have focused on the patterns and determinants of residential segregation among whites and minorities (Farley and Frey, 1994, 1996; Iceland, 2004; Logan et al., 2004; Quillian, 2002), generally concluding that between 1990 and 2000, black segregation levels somewhat declined (Iceland et al., 2002; Massey and Denton, 1992, 1993), while Latino segregation has been steadily rising (Massey and Fischer, 1999; Wilkes and Iceland, 2004). These patterns accompany a dramatic surge in immigration to the US, where migrants are visible minorities from Asian, African, West Indian, and Latin American nations. Importantly, a nontrivial proportion of Latin American immigrants are undocumented (Passel, 2006; Passel and Cohn, 2008), an impediment which likely complicates a journey towards socioeconomic incorporation and residential integration, goals which are already difficult to achieve for darker-skinned documented immigrants (Denton and Massey, 1989; Massey and Bitterman, 1985; Massey and Denton, 1992).

While there has been an intense focus on the type or quality of neighborhoods in which native and foreign-born whites, blacks and Latinos currently reside and move to, a lack of survey data has prevented an examination of how undocumented Latinos fare in this quest for high quality neighborhoods. Including undocumented Latinos in studies of neighborhood quality is important because they make up a significant proportion of the fastest growing immigrant population in the United States and because once here, many participate in the same activities their documented counterparts participate, such as forming families and raising children who attend neighborhood schools. Since school quality is directly related to neighborhood quality, results focused on undocumented Latinos' locational attainment outcomes have potentially important implications for how well the next generation of an important and growing segmented of the population are educated. Examining the

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contexts in which important activities such as living and schooling occur for such a vulnerable population is therefore a worthwhile, but understudied research activity. In this paper, I begin to fill this void in the literature.

Scholars (Friedman and Rosenbaum, 2007; South et al., 2005, 2008; Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2001) have examined group differences in segregation outcomes between native-born whites and other native and foreign-born minorities. Their goals are twofold. Using models collectively known as *locational attainment* (Alba and Logan, 1991, 1992, 1993; Alba et al., 1999; Logan and Alba, 1993; Logan et al., 1996), they first seek to determine the extent to which native and foreign-born minority groups have access to the same desirable neighborhoods (most often defined in the literature as a majority white neighborhood) as their native-born white counterparts, net of critical characteristics. Second, they wish to determine the extent to which minority groups receive lower or higher locational returns to their human and financial capital endowments than whites, and whether these relationships vary by nativity status. Their results collectively suggest an ethnic gradient with regard to locational attainment: whites have access to the best neighborhoods, followed by Asians, native-born Latinos, foreign-born Latinos, and then blacks (Alba et al., 1994; Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2001). In addition, analysts more or less agree that the ethnic gradient extends to the role of socioeconomic resources in minimizing or expanding these group differences. Whites, Asians, and Latinos are better able to leverage their economic and human capital resources to access the best neighborhoods than native-born blacks (South et al., 2005, 2008).

While illuminating, these findings are largely based on national data and therefore represent an average of many place-specific results. The ethnic hierarchy of locational attainment noted above may look very different in a city like Los Angeles where the immigrant population is larger, more socioeconomically diverse, and where residential location is partly determined by place-specific structural factors. For example, Los Angeles is a city that contains a diverse set of immigrants (i.e. many impoverished undocumented Latinos as well as many financially stable Blacks, Latinos and Asians). It also contains Latinos who have stated preferences for living in their own communities, while being averse to living among native-born blacks (Charles, 2006). It is also a place where new immigrants likely desire neighborhoods near co-ethnics who can help ease the transition to a new environment (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Moreover, even though Los Angeles contains segregated neighborhoods, it also has many integrated neighborhoods, giving residents ample opportunities to live alongside people with varying backgrounds (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1997). Place-specific structural factors may thus rearrange the ethnic gradient in locational attainment detected in national-based samples, allowing native-born blacks to perform as well or perhaps even outpace many of their minority counterparts.

A reexamination of the nature of this ethnic gradient in Los Angeles is therefore potentially revealing. Such a case-study would provide a valuable update to the literature regarding blacks' performance vis-à-vis vulnerable groups such as undocumented Latinos, while clarifying our theoretical understanding of groups' placement in the attainment hierarchy. I begin to fill these theoretical and empirical voids using the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (LA–FANS), a newly available data source from Los Angeles that allows for the identification of undocumented immigrants and a city specific analysis of ethnic gradients in neighborhood mobility patterns.

This study goes beyond prior work in two ways. First, analysts who study locational attainment have consistently focused on racial (Adelman, 2005; Alba and Logan, 1993; Alba et al., 2000; Massey and Denton, 1993), ethnic (South et al., 2005, 2008), and nativity status differences (Friedman and Rosenbaum, 2007; Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2001) in neighborhood quality outcomes. However, given the rapid influx of undocumented Latinos into the United States (Passel, 2006; Passel and Cohn, 2008), documentation status is potentially an important understudied background factor in the locational attainment and status attainment processes more generally. Second, part of the locational attainment literature (Logan and Alba, 1993; South et al., 2005, 2008) involves examining the extent to which groups differ with regard to the effects of socioeconomic status on neighborhood quality outcomes. Logan and Alba (1993) developed the theoretical apparatus for this exercise, and are joined by Scott South and colleagues (South et al., 2005, 2008) in empirically testing these ideas. I add to this body of work by examining how the effects of socioeconomic status on neighborhood quality outcomes for undocumented Latinos differ from their documented black, white, native, and foreign-born counterparts.

2. Background and theory

2.1. Spatial assimilation

Analyses focusing on group differences in ethnic residential segregation are generally organized around two theories of locational attainment: spatial assimilation and place stratification. The spatial assimilation model (Massey, 1985) is used to describe and explain groups' placement in the spatial hierarchy. It is conceptually similar to the status attainment model (Blau and Duncan, 1967) in that both are concerned with the social process by which individuals convert their ascribed and achieved statuses into placement in a social hierarchy. However, while the status attainment model is concerned with individuals' placement in high status occupations, the spatial assimilation model focuses on individuals' placement in high quality neighborhoods. As argued in this literature, an important part of moving up the socioeconomic hierarchy involves attaining residence in a desirable community. As such, when individuals leave undesirable neighborhoods for more desirable ones, this is a social process similar to earning more education, income, or job status, and is therefore an important topic for social analysis.